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ABSTRACT

A new principal frequently has a great impact on the school climate. This paper presents findings of a study that examined the degree of change in school climate in three schools with new principals. The Effective Schools Climate Inventory (O'Neal 1990) was administered to staff members in one elementary, one middle, and one high school at the beginning of the school year and again in January. Results of the first ESCI were given to the principals at the beginning of the fall semester. Interviews were conducted with the principals in January. Overall, there was no statistically significant difference between the two survey results. In other words, there was no clear indication that new principals had a positive impact on school climate. Despite a few exceptions, principals' overall perceptions of their schools' climates were inconsistent with those reported by their school staff. The principals identified only 5 of the 17 school-climate issues identified by staff as significant. The paper recommends that schools regularly conduct quantifiable measures of school climate and address the low level of parent involvement in the three schools. Four tables are included. (Contains 18 references.) (LMI)

Running Head: IMPROVING SCHOOL CLIMATE

MEASURING THE DEGREE OF SUCCESS IN IMPROVING SCHOOL CLIMATE IN SCHOOLS WITH NEW PRINCIPALS

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MEASURING THE DEGREE OF SUCCESS IN IMPROVING SCHOOL CLIMATE IN SCHOOLS WITH NEW PRINCIPALS

A new principal in a school frequently has a great impact on the school climate. This seems to be especially apparent at the beginning of the school year when faculty and students are excited about renewing their work. They look forward to positive change that may be brought about by a new principal in the "honeymoon period".

As former practitioners in school administration the authors are keenly aware of the importance of school climate. It is a vital factor and should be continually monitored in a systematic way. Our thrust in this project was to investigate the impact that new principals have in three buildings, and to measure that effect. We hypothesized that new principals have a positive impact on school climate, and that principals have the ability to 'sense' issues that are effecting climate in a school building.

From a historical perspective, school climate has been under study by a number of researchers. The importance of classroom and school climate was emphasized by John Goodlad (1984) who studied 38 schools in seven regions across the country. The study involved interviews with all 38 principals, 1,350 teachers, 8,624 parents, and 17,163 students. There were also intensive observations in 1,016 classrooms. Goodlad reported that schools differed very little in the type of instruction found within classes. He reported, though, that differences in students' achievement were found, and summarized these findings.

"I have used the adjectives, 'healthy', 'satisfying', and 'renewing' to describe schools in our sample that pay more than average attention to the quality of interactions among those inhabiting the school and to the physical and social context in which these interactions occur....Schools differed in their ability to create an academic ambiance, but the differences appear to be more related to

school and classroom climate factors than to methods of teaching per se." (p. 555)

More recently, Owens (1991) cited Renato Tagiuri in his description of school climate because it addresses the total environmental quality within a school building. Owens placed variables into one of four categories. The first category, known as the ecology category, included physical and material features of the school. Owens postulated that one might gain insight into the condition of school climate by observing the condition of the building, equipment, technology and similar components. The second category is known as the Milieu category. This included the characteristics of the people who comprise the organization- their needs, motivations, and disposition. The third category, the social system, included a description of the organizational structure of the school. This kind of information is evidenced by descriptions of how teachers interact with each other and with administrators. Owen's final category was called the culture component. This included the values, beliefs, and norms that are characteristic of members of the organization.

In their study of 12 high schools in England, Rutter and his colleagues (1979) reported that a variety of factors differentiated schools with positive student behavior and high achievement from schools facing serious problems in these areas. Factors within the schools control that significantly affected students' behavior and performance included:

1. The degree to which teachers emphasized academic achievement;
2. Teachers' organizational, instructional and classroom management skills;
3. High teacher expectations about students' performance;
4. Teachers' willingness to see students about problems at any time;

5. An emphasis on rewards rather than punishment;
6. Teachers' involvement in decision making;
7. Associated consistency in teachers' expectations and behavior; and,
8. Students' involvement in positions of responsibility within the school.

Rutter and his associates concluded that "the pattern of findings suggested that not only were pupils influenced by the way they were dealt with as individuals, but also there was a group influence resulting from the ethos of the school as a social institution" (p. 205).

The factors described by Wayson, Pinnell, and Rutter have also been reported in three books whose authors conducted ecological analyses of effective schools. Lipsitz's (1984) analysis of four high-quality middle schools, Lightfoot's (1983) study of six high schools, and Rutter, et. Al.(1979) study of school programs for at-risk youth, offer thoughtful portraits of schools that are serving their clients well.

Educators interested in assessing their own school's climate can turn to a large number of instruments and procedures. Dorman's (1981) Middle Grades Assessment Program has been found to be extremely helpful in assisting middle-school staff in determining directions for improving the quality of their school's climate. Educators interested in assessing other school climate instruments and procedures might refer to Benton & Bulack, (1994); Kelley & Fenner, (1996); Lindelow & Mazzarella, (1981); Sabo, (1995); Squires, (1983); Witcher, (1993); Wood & Johnson, (1982); Yau, (1995).

Teachers should work together to consider not only how their classroom management and instruction influence students' behavior and achievement, but also how the school environment can be altered to encourage positive student attitudes. Sergiovanni (1995) explained the importance of this issue when he discussed the kinds of vital

relationships that must exist between teachers and students. His work underscored the fact that these relationships are more special, meaningful, and personalized. This results in a quality of connectedness that makes members of the school community feel a special obligation to look out for each other.

Considering this review of information, the researchers designed this study to measure school climate in three schools where principals were relatively new. Following this effort, the design called for a structured interview with the principals to determine whether they sensed the same change in school climate that was found in the analysis.

Procedures

The questions that the researchers intended to explore involved the degree of change in school climate in buildings with new principals. The researchers' premise was that new principals generally produce improvements in school climate in their initial year. To measure this concept, the researchers adopted a design that required a climate survey of staff members at the beginning of the school year, and a follow-up survey to be conducted in January. The three schools included one high school, one middle school, and one elementary school. The survey instrument, The Effective Schools Climate Inventory, developed by O'Neal, (1990) was administered to all staff members. This instrument was selected because it was a researched based that appeared to give the researchers a comprehensive view of school climate, but at the same time, was not excessively intrusive for the respondent. The instrument identified eight general variables. Each of the general variables was divided into sub-variables. As indicated below:

I. Clear school mission: instruction
   1. Philosophy/mission
   2. Instructional goals and objectives

II. Safe and well-ordered Learning Environment

1. Facilities

2. Discipline

III. Expectations for success

1. Of students

2. Of professional personnel

3. Communicated

IV. High morale

1. Of students

2. Of professional personnel

V. Effective instructional leadership

1. Perceptions of

2. Actions of

VI. Quality classroom instruction

1. Objectives/expectations

2. Opportunities to learn

VII. Monitoring student progress

1. Program modifications

2. Student progress

3. Feedback

VIII. Positive home-school relations

1. Parental support

2. Parental involvement

3. Communication

Each of the subscales was represented on the inventory by two items. Respondents recorded answers to each of the forty items by indicating whether the activity mentioned in the item occurred 1) never, 2) rarely, 3) usually, or 4) always. Items were scored from one to four, respectively. Appendix 1 contains a copy of the ESCI. In addition to the O'Neal survey, demographic information was collected for each participant. This information included the respondent's age, teaching

assignment, past work history, years in the district, years in teaching, and sex.

Scores from the first ESCI were recorded in a database. Results were shared with the building administrators who then took the initiative to implement practices that they each believed would improve school climate. At the end of the first semester, the second ESCI was distributed to the staffs of each school in the study. The results were again recorded in the database, and differences between the two were calculated. The researchers used a paired t test to detect significant differences between the ESCI administered in September and the second one administered in January. The alpha < 0.1 was set by the researchers. This relatively high alpha value enabled the researchers to assist the principals in the study by identifying a broader range of potential school climate concerns. A more stringent alpha would have detected fewer problems but with a greater degree of certainty. In view of the fact that it was the researchers' desire to offer ample information about potential school climate problems, it made sense to adopt the alpha cited above rather than risk overlooking an existing problem.

Findings

The researchers hypothesized that the three relatively new principals in the study would improve the school climate. The principals were provided with information gathered through the administration of the ESCI at the beginning of the semester. This enabled them to address concerns that appeared in the initial data.

Findings indicated that, overall, there was no statistically significant difference between the survey conducted at the beginning of the semester and the final survey at the end. However, when the subscales on the ESCI were similarly compared, several significant findings were noted on some of these measures.

Comparing the subacales for School A yielded several statistically significant findings. Findings are summarized on Table 1. The staff's reported belief regarding the effectiveness of instructional leadersnip significantly increased over the course of the semester, $t(11) = 2.35$. The staff input regarding the discipline of the school was significantly less in the January survey than in September, $t(11) = 1.75$. Finally, the staff's belief regarding the opportunity to learn significantly decreased over the course of the semester, $t(11) = 1.39$. From a practical standpoint, the analysis suggested that the teachers sensed a decrease in monitoring student progress as the semester progressed. This variable was barely over the researchers' alpha level, but was noted so that the participating principal could take steps to correct the issue if necessary.

School B in the study had statistically significant differences with four variables. Concerns were noted in the decline of clarity of instructional goals and objectives, $t(14) = 1.66$, student discipline, $t(14) = 1.61$, expectations for success of students, $t(14) = 1.42$, the communication of expectations for success, $t(14) = 1.73$, and parental support $t(14) = 1.58$. See Table 2 for the summary of data for this school.

There were seven statistically significant findings regarding the subscales in School C. Of these, five reflected a decline, and two reflected improvements. Instructional objectives and expectations, $t(12) = 1.39$, and the monitoring of student progress, $t(12) = 1.17$, both increased over the semester. Clarity of school mission declined during the semester, $t(12) = 1.39$. The presence of a safe environment as indicated by the condition of the facilities also declined over the semester, $t(12) = 2.24$. Communicating the expectations for success for students and staff decreased, $t(12) = 2.56$. Monitoring of student progress decreased, and $t(12) = 1.48$, as did the perception of parental involvement, $t(12) = 1.82$. Finally, the actions of the leadership

declined through the semester, $t(12) = 1.77$. See table 3 for the summary data on this school.

Interviews With the Principal

Following the administration of the survey in September, the researchers shared the data with the building principals. This created an awareness among the principals regarding the status of school climate in the respective buildings. Following the administering of the January survey, the researchers created structured questions for the principals. The questions were designed to assess whether the principals were aware of the changes that occurred between the two surveys. The researchers carefully studied the text of the structured interviews conducted with the principals of the participating schools. We found no common theme or strand that could be identified or isolated through all three interviews. However, there were several items that could be found in two of the three. Two principals indicated that their summer preparation in advance of the school year positively affected school climate. The same two principals also indicated a positive boost through planning and hosting in a social gathering with the staff. Also, two of the three cited extensive but beneficial efforts to work with the community and community leaders.

While one principal could not identify any incidents or problems that had a negative impact on school climate, two quickly offered potential issues. The first principal indicated concern over the high level of discipline referrals and the staff's perception of inconsistent resolution of the discipline problems. The two remaining principals were in agreement that the effect of rumors regarding pending building closures and possible staff reductions have had a negative impact on school climate.

With regard to successful attempts that encouraged positive home/school relations, two of the three principals listed a variety of

programs and techniques that were successful in their individual buildings. One such program required telephone calls to parents regarding positive student performance. Another example was the policy designed to accommodate parent schedules for meetings. Another practice involved the participation of the school in local charity drives and activities. Yet, another activity reported was a conscious effort to neutralize negative staff members by involving them in the decision making process when applicable. One principal reported difficulty with positive home/school relations as a result of the lack of ethnic diversity among the teaching staff.

Two of the principals reported using handbooks and written procedures to communicate expectations for success to both students and staff. The third principal cited efforts to focus on issues and solutions, rather than problems and blame.

There was wide variance in the principals effective leadership practices. For example, one principal cited the importance of symbolic leadership through his insistence of being on the job every day, leading from the bottom up. Another principal strongly believed in seeking faculty input, while reserving the right to render the final decision. This same principal indicated the need to carefully monitor progress toward school goals by effectively supervising the staff. Additionally, this principal cited the need to take prompt, decisive action especially in crisis decision situations.

Each of the structured interviews concluded with the question regarding what advice the principal might have for a new principal beginning an initial year in a similar school. One principal suggested the need to read all documentation about the school--old policy manuals, faculty handbooks, student handbooks and other similar material. Another principal suggested the value of developing a strong base of support within the faculty and with central office personnel. Another opinion

focused upon the need to be "part of the solution, not part of the problem".

There was no consensus between building principals concerning any of the items presented in the structured interviews. However, as revealed above, two of the three agreed on a wide variety of issues. Advanced preparation for the school year was cited by two principals, as was the planning and hosting of a social gathering at the beginning of the school year. Another area of agreement revolved around work with home-school relations where two principals were able to cite specific programs and techniques. Written procedures for communicating expectations for success were also mentioned by two of the principals.

Conclusions

Basically, this study was an attempt to quantify the change in school climate in three buildings where relatively new principals were assigned. A measure, the ESCI, was taken at the beginning and end of the first semester. Results were analyzed to detect differences that occurred over this time period. Structured interviews were then conducted. This enabled the researchers to gather information about their perceptions of any change in school climate.

There was no clear indication that new principals have a positive impact on school climate. The overall changes that were detected between the September and January survey were not statistically significant. Additionally, an ANOVA indicated no statistical significance between the schools. Therefore, we can conclude that in our study, new principals did not increase school climate as measured on survey.

Based upon the structured interviews that were conducted nearly all of the statistical findings in the study were invisible to the building principals. There were, however, five exceptions to this generalization. First, the principal in School A perceived that the opportunity to learn had improved because of a variety of measures taken

to get his building under control. The data confirmed this perception as indicated on Table 1, Quality Instruction variable. Another consistency from the same school was found regarding student progress and feedback regarding it. Programs were implemented to insure that students and parents were aware of academic performance, and the data again confirmed this notion.

The principal of School B noted a concern about the high volume of discipline referrals and the faculty's perceptions of inconsistent resolution of the problems. This was confirmed in the data under the Safe Environment variable as noted in Table 2. Another concern was noted by the same principal regarding the lack of parental support. Again data supported his concern.

The principal in School C was concerned that there was a decline in parental involvement with the school. The Home-School Relations variable supported the principal's perception as seen in Table 3.

Besides these isolated examples, the opinions expressed by the principals were inconsistent with the measures taken by the researchers. Of the seventeen significant findings, only five were identified by the principals.

Such incongruency highlights the need to conduct a quantifiable measure of school climate regularly. Information gleaned informally by administrators about school climate is almost certainly clouded by daily pressures and priorities incumbent upon the principalship. It is therefore vital that quantitative measures be used wherever possible.

Another issue was revealed ir looking at the low means recorded in all three schools for the parental involvement variable. Charts 1, 2, and 3 clearly indicate this low mean. This appears to be a clear and universal issue among these schools. We would recommend that this issue be addressed by administrators in these schools in an effort to increase the level of parental involvement.

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Table 1

Subvariables For School A

Sub-variable	September Mean	January Mean	Difference	t Values
Clear Mission				
Philosophy/mission	3.208	3.250	0.042	0.180
Instructional Goals & Objectives	3.583	3.458	-0.125	1.000
Safe & Well- ordered Environment				
Facilities	3.083	3.125	0.042	0.200
Discipline	3.250	2.875	-0.375	1.750*
Expectations for success				
Of students	2.417	2.417	0.000	0.000
Of faculty	2.958	3.125	0.167	0.840
Communicated	3.250	3.125	-0.125	0.540
High Morale				
Of Students	2.708	2.667	-0.041	0.290
Of Faculty	3.250	3.208	-0.042	0.360
Effective instructional leadership				
Perceptions of	3.125	3.292	0.167	0.940
Actions of	2.875	2.542	-0.333	2.350*
Quality instruction				
Objectives/expectations	2.958	2.875	-0.083	0.560
Time on Task	3.167	3.292	0.125	0.820
Opportunity to learn	3.083	3.333	0.250	1.390*
Monitor student progress				
Program modifications	2.708	2.500	-0.208	0.830
Student progress	2.875	2.667	-0.208	1.330
Feedback	2.833	3.083	0.250	1.200
Positive home-school relations				
Parental support	2.667	2.667	0.000	0.000
Parental involvement	2.083	1.917	-0.166	1.000
Communication	3.292	3.458	0.166	0.940

Note: N = 12, $p < .10$,
* = significant

Table 2

Subvariables For School B

	September Mean	January Mean	Difference	t value
Sub-variable				
Clear mission				
Philosophy/mission	3.000	2.964	-0.036	0.190
Instructional Goals & Objectives	3.286	2.964	-0.322	1.660*
Safe & well ordered environment				
Facilities	2.929	2.893	-0.036	0.290
Discipline	3.179	2.929	-0.250	1.610*
Expectations for success				
Of students	2.821	2.536	-0.285	1.420*
Of faculty	3.000	3.000	0.000	0.000
Communicated	3.000	2.643	-0.357	1.730*
High Morale				
Of Students	2.679	2.679	0.000	0.000
Of Faculty	3.036	2.893	-0.143	0.720
Effective Instructional leadership				
Perceptions of	3.000	2.893	-0.107	0.560
Actions of	2.571	2.571	0.000	0.000
Quality instruction				
Objectives/expectations	2.964	2.893	-0.071	0.490
Time on Task	2.857	2.714	-0.143	0.840
Opportunity to learn	3.143	3.107	-0.036	0.170
Monitoring student progress				
Program modifications	2.893	2.857	-0.036	0.190
Student progress	2.964	3.000	0.036	0.230
Feedback	3.179	3.107	-0.072	0.410
Positive home-school relations				
Parental support	2.821	2.607	-0.214	1.580*
Parental involvement	2.321	2.250	-0.071	0.810
Communication	3.321	3.107	-0.214	1.030

Note: N = 14, $p < .10$
* = significant

Table 3

Subvariables For School C

	September Mean	January Mean	Difference	t value
Sub-variable				
Clear mission				
Philosophy/mission	3.292	3.167	-0.125	1.390*
Instructional Goals & Objectives	3.250	3.375	0.125	0.420
Safe & well-ordered environment				
Facilities	3.417	3.125	-0.292	2.240*
Discipline	3.375	3.208	-0.167	1.080
Expectations for success				
Of students	2.708	2.625	-0.083	0.620
Of faculty	3.167	3.083	-0.084	0.800
Communicated	3.625	3.167	-0.458	2.560*
High Morale				
Of Students	2.833	2.875	0.042	0.230
Of Faculty	3.125	3.042	-0.083	0.800
Effective instructional leadership				
Perceptions of	3.208	3.167	-0.041	0.377
Actions of	3.208	2.875	-0.333	1.000*
Quality instruction				
Objectives/expectations	2.667	2.917	0.250	1.770*
Time on Task	3.000	2.958	-0.042	0.320
Opportunity to learn	3.167	3.208	0.041	1.000
Monitor student progress				
Program modifications	2.625	2.792	0.167	1.170
Student progress	2.708	2.875	0.167	1.480*
Feedback	3.083	3.042	-0.041	0.560
Positive home-school relations				
Parental support	2.667	2.583	-0.084	0.360
Parental involvement	2.208	2.000	-0.208	1.820*
Communication	3.500	3.417	-0.083	1.000

Note: N = 14, $p < .10$
* = significant

Table 4

Summary of comments from the structured interview

Question 1. "Tell me about activities that you did that might have had an effect on school climate."

School A	School B	School C
Met with staff during the summer.	Used summer to prepare for school year.	
Kickoff party for the beginning of the year.	Back to school party.	Christmas Gifts for faculty.
Highly organized on the first day of school.	Community involvement.	Community circles.
Staff handbook prepared.	Sought out school patrons/critics and involved them in program.	
Communicated high expectations for staff.		

Question 2. "What incident/problem can you recall that may have had a negative impact on school climate?"

School A	School B	School C
No Recollection	High volume of discipline referrals.	
	Differing perceptions of the resolution of referrals.	
	Anxiety of the potential closing of building.	Pending cuts in some programs.

Question 3. "What happens in your building that encourages positive home school relations?"

School A	School B	School C
Positive home contact log.		Programs involving student performances.
Accommodating parent schedules for conferences.		
Community involvement in recognizing high academic achieving students.	Recognizing academically successful students.	
Neutralizing negative staff by asking for and considering input.		
	Involve school in community/charity programs.	

Question 4. "How do you communicate expectations for success for students?"

School A	School B	School C
Handbooks	Written expectation in handbook.	Did not address issue.
Principal is leader in academic arena.	Parent conferences with the student present.	
Visible principal.		
Conferences with under-achieving students.	Student conferences	

Question 4. "How do you communicate expectations for success for faculty?"

School A	School B	School C
Regular staff meetings with mutually developed agenda,	Written expectation in handbook.	Strong expectation of the team concept.
Principal monitors school goals.	Individual meetings with the faculty.	
Effective supervision of staff.	Regularly scheduled departmental meetings.	

Question 5. "How do you practice effective school leadership?"

School A	School B	School C
Use faculty input, but the decision is the principal's.	Principal shows up every day.	Establish a clear vision.
Delegates duties to effective staff members.	Initiates change using "bottom-up" strategy.	Develops shared vision with the staff.
Prompt decisions and actions.	Use data to justify changes.	
Decisive when visible and/or in a crisis situation.		

Question 6. "Having had you initial experience in this building, what advice would you give a new principal beginning in a similar school?"

School A	School B	School C
Be organized.	"There is similar school."	Look for issues and solutions, not problems and blame.
Meet with staff in small groups.	Develop strong basis of support with faculty and central office.	
Show respect and appreciation for all employees.	Communicate with parent leadership.	
Meet conflict directly.	Stay out of the teacher's lounge.	
Read all documents regarding your school.		
Carry no grudges.		